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ABSTRACT

The Youth Fair Chance (YFC) program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor to help young people finish high school, get better jobs, and address personal and family problems. Twelve YFC programs operate in urban areas, and four operate in rural areas, including a locale with a high proportion of Native Americans and one that is home to many migrant and seasonal farm workers. This publication summarizes features of YFC programs and analyzes their implementation. It also highlights experiences that may be useful to designers of other programs for youth and comprehensive initiatives for communities. All the programs had three key components: (1) learning centers were set up to provide education, employment, and support for youths who were out of school; (2) school-to-work initiatives were launched in local secondary schools; and (3) communities got involved in the program through community advisory boards. The flexibility to meet the needs of local youth at the heart of all the programs resulted from pulling together organizations within the community to form collaboratives. YFC programs differ from conventional job training programs in that they focus on specific geographic areas and provide opportunities for local involvement. The experience of YFC programs indicates that programs can provide guaranteed access to appropriate services, a finding that answers a question posed by Congress. A second question posed by Congress is whether the programs can set up integrated intake and case management systems. The answer to this question is a qualified "yes," since sites were able to set up case management, but case managers were not able to determine eligibility for other employment training, health, or income support programs. YFC sites face a future complicated by funding problems, but most expect to try to become self-sustaining. (SLD)

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ED 413 403

THE POSITIVE FORCE OF YOUTH FAIR CHANCE

Giving Young People in Poverty a Chance at Education and Earnings

Young people in high-poverty areas across the nation share many similar needs; for example, they all need solid educations and access to good jobs. Yet the road to a productive adulthood can be fraught with a variety of obstacles. Crime, drugs, gangs, and violence plague many high-poverty communities. Underfunded schools struggle to teach the skills needed for the future, but seeing so many unemployed adults around them saps young people's motivation to learn. At the same time, many residents want to create partnerships with governments, businesses, schools, churches, and community-based organizations to create better prospects for their young people. They hope to counter the negative forces of the streets, which drag young people down, with positive forces to help them up.

WHAT IS YFC?

One of these positive forces is the Youth Fair Chance (YFC) program. YFC supports programs to help young people finish high school, get better jobs, and address personal and family problems that are obstacles to success. Case managers coordinate program services--education, employment preparation and training, counseling, and support services--and try to help young people find solutions to their problems. Twelve YFC programs operate in urban areas and four operate in rural areas, including a locale with a high proportion of Native Americans and one that is home to many migrant and seasonal farmworkers.[1]

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., is evaluating YFC, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. This publication summarizes features of YFC programs and analyzes their implementation. It also highlights experiences that may be useful to designers of other programs for youths and comprehensive initiatives for communities.

The Strategy

To give youths better access to programs that could meet their needs, target areas were saturated with a range of services that focused on education and employment. All the programs had three key components:

- Learning centers were set up to provide education, employment, and support for youths who were out of school.

[1] A 17th site was added later.

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YFC Programs at a Glance

Number of Programs Operating	16
Target Age Group	14 to 30 years old
Services Provided	Education, employment preparation and training, counseling, and support services
Typical Target Area	Fewer than 30,000 residents, high poverty rate, problems associated with poverty
Average Program Funding (First Two Years)	$4 million

NOTE: A 17th site was added later.

- School-to-work initiatives were launched in local secondary schools to improve student learning and knowledge about careers.
- Communities got involved in the program through community advisory boards.

Flexibility to meet the needs of local youths is at the heart of the programs.

How did YFC do all this? Flexibility to meet the needs of local youths is at the heart of the programs. Individuals and communities vary greatly, and their problems can require individualized solutions. Programs may need to find child care for one youth, arrange an eye exam for another, or obtain bus passes for another. One community may have a gang problem; another may have a dearth of employment opportunities but no gangs. In the first community, YFC can work with law enforcement agencies to develop gang intervention activities; in the second, it can develop bus service with the public transportation agency so that youths can get to work in other neighborhoods.

The YFC Difference

YFC is different from conventional job training programs for youths funded under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA). These programs serve only those who meet eligibility criteria, such as being a high school dropout or receiving welfare assistance. They also do not focus on specific geographic areas and provide few opportunities for community input. Although these programs support some school activities, they usually do not work closely with schools. In contrast, YFC allows all youths in a target area to participate and encourages community residents to play a role in advising and guiding the program. YFC also collaborates actively with schools.

YFC programs were initially slated to receive federal support for five years. But funding cuts provided an earlier-than-expected look at how sites would try to become self-sustaining when federal support ended.

A Look at YFC Target Areas

Population	11,000 to 35,000
Poverty Rates	23% to 69%
Geographic Location	5 sites in large cities 7 sites in small cities 4 sites in rural areas
Racial/Ethnic Makeup of Area	Varies substantially
How Many Youths Are Dropouts, High School Graduates Earning $5 or Less Hourly, or Unemployed	33%

NOTE: Data are from the 1990 census and from a telephone survey of youths in YFC target areas.

After each site received an initial grant of approximately $3 million in late June 1994 and another $1 million in June 1995, funding for the next three years, anticipated to be $1 to $2 million a year, was eliminated because of changing congressional priorities. In response, sites curtailed full-fledged efforts to implement their programs and had to work harder to build support among program partners during the crucial implementation period. Sites adjusted their implementation plans to stretch the initial funding to cover two and a half to three years of operations; they also stepped up their efforts to become self-sustaining. As a result, the cuts also caused YFC's experiences to differ from what might have happened with three more years of funding.

Getting a YFC program off the ground involved three major tasks: (1) building collaborations among local organizations and community residents, (2) setting up learning centers, and (3) working with schools to launch school-to-work programs. Here, we look at each of these issues in turn.

COLLABORATIONS WERE KEY

Creating YFC programs involved pulling together organizations within the community to form collaboratives. This collaborative structure was key to YFC's ability to connect youths with services that could address a wide range of needs. Funds went from DOL to local JTPA programs. About half these programs developed local YFC collaboratives themselves, and the other half passed the funding on to nonprofit or community-based organizations.

Small teams designed key program elements as part of the grant competition. Organizations worked quickly to set up the programs after funding was received. The short planning periods, combined with the unique mandate to serve all youths in an area rather than only those who met eligibility requirements, meant that it took time for

Typical Collaborators in YFC Programs

Employment training organizations

Educational organizations (typically schools and community colleges)

Community-based and civic organizations

Social service agencies

Businesses

YFC advisory boards
- Residents
- Local business representatives
- Churches
- Civic organizations
- Agency staff

some organizations to understand what YFC was about. This led to start-up delays as roles and responsibilities were worked out. In most sites, different entities, with well-established internal procedures and administrative rules, had to learn to work together in new ways.

Most programs used contracts with service providers to set up a wide range of services. Because most sites had little or no experience running a program like YFC, they could not predict how many youths they would serve, what kinds of services would be needed, and what results the services would produce. Some sites had to go through several rounds of negotiation with service providers to work out contracts that both parties could accept, a process that delayed startup.

Community advisory boards were intended to ensure that target communities had a real stake in YFC programs.

Community advisory boards were intended to ensure that target communities had a real stake in YFC programs. The boards provided ideas and guidance to help match service offerings with youths' needs, held agencies accountable for YFC activities, and gave legitimacy to the programs, often by including respected community leaders.

Early on, many sites recruited a range of people for the boards. Agency staff were heavily represented. However, DOL pushed boards to have stronger community representation, pressing them to reduce direct agency involvement and turn over more responsibility to residents and others not connected with YFC. Community residents exerted the same pressure, since they viewed agency staff on boards as a conflict of interest. Some programs responded by reconstituting their boards to enhance the role of residents or by changing their procedures to ensure that residents had a greater voice.

The reduction in YFC funding thrust community advisory boards into the position of having to look for ways to sustain YFC. Boards

formed committees to look for funding and to decide which program components to continue. It is too soon to say how successful boards will be in this effort.

THE YFC LEARNING CENTER CONCEPT

YFC learning centers provide education, training, employment, and support services for out-of-school youths and young adults who live in the target area. Before setting up the centers, sites had to identify, obtain, and renovate facilities from which they could provide these services. Many sites ran into delays in this first step; some sites had to change their service offerings to suit the facility they located. They then had to get the message out about their learning centers and the services provided.

Establishing a learning center was often a major effort. The process started with finding a facility and negotiating the lease agreement. Finding a good facility was challenging because programs operated in residential areas and had only 18 months of grant funds to commit. Because these areas had a limited amount of suitable commercial space available, choices were few. When a facility was the right size, it often needed extensive renovations. Despite these difficulties, 11 programs began serving out-of-school youths in either temporary or permanent facilities within one year after receiving a grant. Nearly all were serving youths in a learning center within two years.

Importance of Outreach and Recruitment

Most sites used traditional means, such as radio and television public service announcements as well as fliers and brochures, to get the word out. However, YFC's message and purpose were not always clear to those being recruited. The large number of services being advertised and the program's broad nature made YFC hard to comprehend. Simple publicity campaigns also had to compete with the large number of services already offered in communities and counter the reluctance of many youths to take advantage of these services.

When publicity campaigns did not succeed in recruiting a large number of participants, program staff turned to other methods. They created referral networks with government agencies and social service providers; they hired community residents to talk one-on-one with youths about the benefits of YFC. However, the most successful recruiting technique appeared to be word of mouth. Many participants had heard about YFC from a relative or friend. Program staff also reported that participants were their best recruiters.

Learning Centers: Their Purpose

Learning centers were able to accomplish YFC's objective: to help youths get education and employment-oriented services. Through these centers, youths had the opportunity to improve their basic academic skills, complete credits to obtain a high school diploma, work toward a GED certificate, learn specific or basic skills, or get a temporary or permanent job. Although not all centers provided this range of services, most provided some on-site educational and job development services. A case manager usually coordinated these services and developed an individualized assessment and service plan for each youth. The case manager was an advocate on participants' behalf and found other resources to help meet their needs.

Enrollment rose over the two years it took sites to set their centers up. Since YFC began, the average learning center has served about 500 young people. More than half of these youths enrolled in the six months from May to October 1996, so enrollment grew over time. During this period, the average learning center enrolled about 270 young people, a rate of 45 a month.

YFC programs used one of three approaches to deliver services:

- In five programs, a one-stop-shopping center allowed youths to receive multiple services from YFC and other service providers at one site.
- In eight programs, participants received most services through the lead agency at the center, and case managers worked with other service providers outside the center if participants had needs the lead agency could not meet.
- In two programs, the services were primarily intake and referral. After youths came in for intake, a staff member, typically a case manager, referred them to appropriate community service providers outside the center.

Services differed across sites but generally were numerous.

Services differed across sites but generally were numerous. Nearly all centers provided some type of educational services to participants, either directly or through subcontractors.

Programs provided job training in a variety of ways. Some programs offered in-house job training. Others relied on links with JTPA for eligible youths. Some sites set aside a portion of YFC funds to train non-JTPA eligible youths, while others made no provision for them. At several sites, most training came from JTPA in-kind services. In general, few young people entered training, for two reasons:

Services Learning Centers Could Offer

Education	Employment
Literacy courses	Job preparation workshops
Basic skills courses	Job training
ESL courses	Job development
GED courses	
High school reentry and diploma programs	**Other**
Help applying for college and financial aid	Gang awareness workshops
	Fathers' workshops
	Computer labs
	Child care centers

- Learning centers did not promote their roles as training providers, which might have limited the number of young people who came to centers to receive training.

- Many young people had weak basic skills they needed to improve before entering training. More of them may enter training in the future, after they complete basic skills or GED courses.

Centers also developed jobs for participants. Most centers hired job development or placement specialists to link participants with employers. These specialists taught participants general job skills, led job clubs, and developed job opportunities, such as internships and permanent placements. Programs also used employment subsidies. Many centers paid subsidies directly to participants for the work they did in internships with employers, in YFC-sponsored community service programs, and in jobs at the YFC center.

The Linchpin: Case Management

Case managers were a vital part of YFC. For many participants, their relationship with their case manager *was* the main YFC intervention. Many youths came to centers burdened by personal problems or crises and relied heavily on their case manager's support. Case managers assessed youths' needs, developed service plans, identified and accessed services, and monitored the fit between needs and the services youths were receiving. They networked with other providers to get counseling, drug rehabilitation programs, health services, food, clothing, and help with other needs. They also ran life skills classes, held support groups, and set up mentoring programs for participants.

CONNECTING STUDENTS WITH CAREERS

Each YFC program set up school-to-work initiatives in one or two schools attended by target area youths. These initiatives were intended to play the same role for in-school youths that learning centers played for out-of-school ones. Programs followed the guidelines in the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 to set up their initiatives. After two years of effort, elements of school-to-work programs are up and running in many schools participating in YFC. However, the complexity of school-to-work initiatives makes it almost impossible to achieve full implementation within two years, and sites have more work ahead of them.

No Small Task: Gaining Staff Support

The first task YFC faced was to gain support from teachers and principals. In a few sites, school-to-work initiatives were under way before YFC began, and support was in place. In most sites, however, YFC staff had to work with school staff to introduce school-to-work concepts and get commitments from staff to join in planning and implementation.

Building support for new programs can be challenging, and YFC was no exception. Gaining support was easier in schools with vocational education programs or career-related magnet programs. Schools in districts with existing school-to-work initiatives were also easier to get on board, as were schools whose districts headed the YFC school-to-work effort. Nonetheless, DOL and its technical assistance provider had to work hard to help program and school staff understand school-to-work concepts.

Getting employers involved is key to the success of school-to-work. Employer involvement came later in YFC, after sites better understood school-to-work and had gained support for it in schools. In YFC's first two years, about a third of the sites had extensive employer involvement in the school-to-work program. Employers were involved in several ways. They sat on advisory boards; they hosted students, and sometimes teachers, for job-shadowing visits; they provided internships; and they released their employees to help school staff develop curricula with a stronger focus on workplace competencies.

Employers generally got involved for three reasons. Some were worried about their bottom line: they needed high-quality workers so they could be competitive. Others cited a charitable motive: they believed they should play a role in their communities by helping schools. Finally, some believed that working with students was a good experience for employees, one that helped them appreciate the skills they used at work and provided a sense of personal reward.

Setting Up Key Components

YFC schools served many at-risk students, and high dropout rates were a key problem. Staff viewed dropout prevention, though distinct from school-to-work activities, as fundamental. They believed ensuring that students stayed in school was a first step in making school-to-work initiatives a success. Dropout prevention activities varied but could include personal counseling, life skills classes, tutoring and remedial classes, mentoring programs, parenting classes, and case management.

Most sites also initiated some kind of career awareness activity. Activities included structured assessments of student career interests, sometimes using computer-based career development software; presentations by employers or teachers on careers; and job shadowing experiences and visits to work sites.

. . . ensuring that students stayed in school was a first step in making school-to-work initiatives a success.

Some YFC schools began setting up another key school-to-work component, "career majors" or "career pathways," programs that involved academic and work-based activities related to a particular career. Students typically chose a career major in the 9th or 10th grade, after they had taken part in career awareness activities. Common career majors were health, manufacturing, and business. Most YFC sites also offered a few internships for school-to-work participants, usually older students.

TAKING STOCK

Sites' experiences let us address two questions posed by Congress:

- Can programs provide guaranteed access to appropriate services?
- Can programs set up integrated intake and case management systems?

The answer to the first question is yes. Programs set up learning centers that gave all youths who walked in education, employment, training, and support services that were available in the area. However, programs are still new; many have not yet reached full enrollment. As more do so, their ability to guarantee services to all youths may be strained.

The answer to the second question is a conditional yes. Sites were able to set up systems of case management in learning centers that enabled youths to tap into a wide array of services. However, case managers were not permitted to determine eligibility for employment training, health, or income support programs. Furthermore, the intake processes for these programs were not combined and simplified. Although programs collaborated with other service providers, none was able to create an integrated service delivery system in the target area. YFC programs often operated in small areas of large cities and could not persuade citywide agencies or providers to change their entire system for a program serving only a few of the city's youths.

Sites' experiences also let us address the following questions about the usefulness of programs like YFC.

Did Access Improve?

How did YFC affect access to services? YFC changed the nature of services and service delivery for out-of-school youths. Learning centers in YFC communities offered a more comprehensive set of services than was available in the comparison communities. Although community-based organizations in the comparison communities often provided some similar services, the range tended to be more limited. Case management was typically not available in the comparison communities; however, it was an integral part of YFC and available in all centers. Although YFC community boards exercised differing levels of control, at a minimum they provided opportunities for a broad range of residents and local agencies to give ideas and guidance to service providers. Generally, no comparable means of communication existed in other communities.

We also examined whether YFC affected access by comparing service environments in the YFC communities and a set of comparison communities. YFC substantially increased the level of resources spent on services for out-of-school youths in the target communities. The JTPA program is a major provider of education and training for young people in both the YFC and the comparison communities. We estimate that YFC spending ranged from 1.5 to 17 times the JTPA expenditures for youths in target areas.

Implementing school-to-work initiatives as part of YFC has made less of a difference for high school students. Schools in target areas as well as comparison communities were often setting up similar school-to-work activities, partly because of the federal push to do so. Many districts collaborating with YFC were engaged in federally supported efforts to set up school-to-work initiatives in other schools.

What Does the Future Hold?

Will local sites continue YFC? After federal funding for YFC was cut off after the second year, sites responded by accelerating their efforts to become self-sustaining. Some also decided to reduce their scale. Most efforts to become self-sustaining are still in the planning stage, and the outcome is not yet clear. Nearly all programs have joined forces to try to obtain national foundation support to stay afloat. This effort, called the National Network, is just beginning.

It will be difficult for sites to obtain enough funding to maintain the entire YFC program (at least on the current scale). It will be particularly hard to find enough funding to sustain the learning centers. There is no natural funding stream that could be tapped, although funding for some components or some target groups may be secured. However, it will be difficult to maintain the diversity of services and the noncategorical nature of YFC. School-to-work efforts are more

likely to be sustained, because school districts can pick up the tab and federal support for school-to-work is strong.

Does the Concept Make Sense?

Is YFC a promising approach? Giving the community a role in influencing program direction is an important and useful feature of the YFC model. The concept that the community could influence program direction was greeted with interest and excitement. YFC community advisory board meetings attracted a wide range of agency representatives and local residents. The promise of receiving funding probably attracted some initially, but meetings were well attended even after funding was cut off.

Giving the community a role in influencing program direction is an important and useful feature of the YFC model.

The effort expended in setting up the community boards is likely to have payoffs in the long run. The boards are helping to continue YFC, and their presence may ultimately be an important factor in attracting future funding.

Another important and useful feature of YFC is that all youths in the target area are eligible for services. Universal eligibility helps recruitment, eliminates the potential stigma of participation, and is easy to implement. Program staff and communities said universal eligibility helped build support for YFC. A potential downside is that a program may not target disadvantaged and low-income youths as heavily as a categorical eligibility program. We have not yet collected data on participant incomes, but site visits and reviews of case files suggest that this downside is limited, because the services YFC provides (such as basic skills, GED preparation, and job development) appeal mostly to youths who are dropouts, unemployed, or working at low wages.

The concept of community-based service delivery also has limitations. YFC target areas were defined using census tracts and often did not correspond to actual neighborhoods. Because of problems with finding facilities, centers were not always in target areas or near the center of target areas. As a result, some youths who lived just outside the YFC areas sought services but had to be denied. This situation did not make sense to them or to program staff.

Another limitation of a neighborhood-based service program like YFC is that it might not improve school experiences for neighborhood youths. Because of busing, magnet schools, and school choice programs, youths from YFC target areas often did not attend local schools. However, schools are vital neighborhood institutions, so efforts by programs like YFC may be important even if they do not directly affect many neighborhood youths. YFC-type efforts can attract favorable attention and enhance a neighborhood's reputation as a place to live and work.

Rural sites had less difficulty with these limitations. The geographic entity usually was well defined, and schools tended to serve the target area. In addition, it was easier to get key people together. For example, in smaller sites, the school superintendent and the mayor were more likely to know about YFC and to participate in developing the program.

Is There Room for Improvement?

What could make YFC better? Opening learning centers to more young people in need could improve YFC. Broadening the services offered to include more activities for middle and high school students would also be helpful.

YFC programs could create a more cohesive set of services by offering activities in learning centers to complement activities in school. Learning centers and schools generally operate in different orbits. They could work together more as partners. For example, centers could provide after-school programs to help middle or high school youths with their homework, enrichment activities to help them learn about their cultures and the arts, and support services to help them deal with personal and social problems. Learning centers could also develop links with schools so that youths who are in danger of dropping out or have already done so can be helped. For example, school counselors could refer these students to YFC learning centers for help. Schools could send lists of recent dropouts to case managers at learning centers, who could contact students to offer their help. By working together, learning centers and schools could create tighter support systems in which fewer youths slip through the cracks.

By working together, learning centers and schools could create tighter support systems in which fewer youths slip through the cracks.

The closed nature of YFC target areas is also unnecessary. In fact, eligibility for services probably doesn't need to be based on residence in a target area. Locating YFC centers in high-poverty areas and offering services to youths who need education or training to obtain decent jobs will automatically aim services toward low-income, disadvantaged youths. Less rigid definitions of target areas would remedy awkward situations such as centers that are outside target areas or youths in need who are turned away because they live outside the target area. It would also help programs achieve a reasonable scale of operations.

As with all community-based programs, there is room for improvement in the YFC concept. Yet the positive force of YFC is clear. The program has had many successes in helping young people finish high school, get better jobs, and resolve personal and family problems that stood in the way of their success. As we look to design other initiatives to help young people in poverty reach for the tools needed to succeed, YFC and its community-based approach can help show the way.

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